

# COVID-19'S IMPACT ON HR WELLBEING



## SUMMARY

Globally, HR has been at the centre of the organisational response to COVID-19; from the beginning to the present day. This research supports a number of trends that AHRI has observed throughout the pandemic, both through feedback from individual members and previous research.

A recurring theme has been the immense workloads that HR practitioners have faced, combined with the loss of connection that long periods of full-time remote working has created. AHRI has consistently asked ‘who is looking after HR as they look after the organisation’, and this research makes this question even more pertinent.

An interesting finding of the research is that the vast majority of people are managing to effectively communicate and connect with others virtually. However, that is not necessarily translating into them feeling connected to their team, with a large percentage missing physical connection and a high percentage feeling isolated from their team.

We note the considerable workload that HR practitioners were under trying to organise remote work, managing downsizing and negotiating JobKeeper in their organisations. With much of that now under some control, the attention of HR needs to move to supporting performance management in remote working situations.

With nearly half of respondents stating their organisation is not very capable of managing the performance of remote workers, it is imperative that HR managers understand and share best practice to create effective performance systems, policies, guidelines and training to support their managers.

The red flag in this research is the huge volumes of work HR professionals are having to manage, which reflects how important HR is during a crisis. Unfortunately, a large percentage of HR professionals are also feeling like they cannot cope with the demands of their role. This increased pressure is already having an impact on mental health and wellbeing with many reporting high levels of fatigue and exhaustion, as well as lower than expected scores around happiness in their job and their life being close to ideal.

The changes that this pandemic has wrought means HR will remain central to the workplaces of the future, with individual HR practitioners key to organisational strategy development, and executive and board decision making.

For the HR profession, the implications of this report are varied – it’s clear the role of the HR practitioner has been amplified and shifted toward redesigning work and workplaces as well as supporting the shift away from an ‘attendance’ culture towards a ‘performance’

culture to provide benefits for the organisation’s efficiency and effectiveness. However, HR practitioners will also need to continue to focus on their own wellbeing.

As we experience further changes to the external environment, HR practitioners will need to focus on and strengthen their own competencies in order to continue to guide and shape their organisations, their people and their culture.

For AHRI’s part, we intend to support them on this journey as they shape the future of their profession and our workplaces.

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Chief Executive Officer and Managing Director,  
Australian HR Institute

*Dr. John Molineux FCPHR*  
Senior Lecturer in HRM, Deakin University

*Dr Adam Fraser*  
Founder and director of e-Lab

# DEMOGRAPHICS

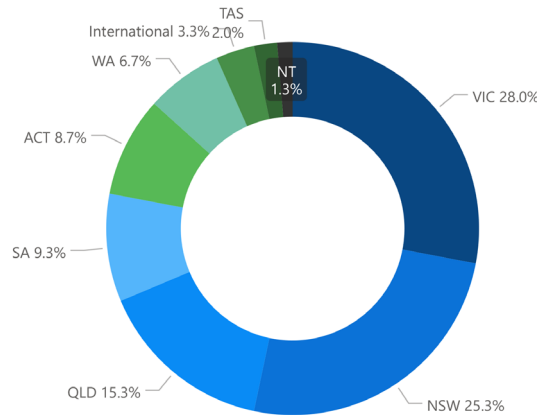
The Australian HR Institute, in partnership with Dr. John Molineux FCPHR from Deakin University and Dr. Adam Fraser CSP, surveyed 150 HR leaders between the 22nd of June – 1st of July 2020, on their ongoing experiences resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic.

The majority of respondents reside in Victoria (28%) and New South Wales (25.3%), in a Metropolitan area (82.0%).

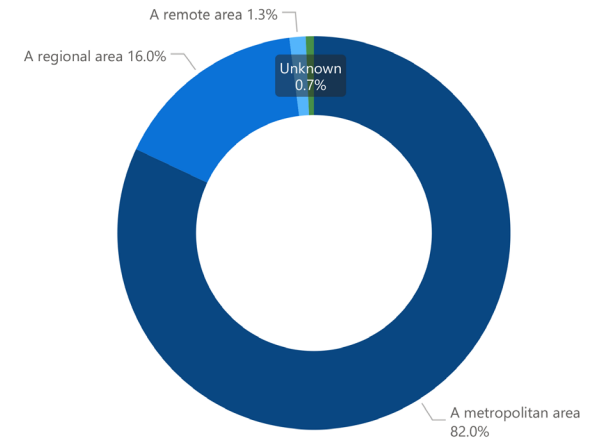
The majority are HR managers or directors (71.3%), while others are HR Business partners (10.7%), HR specialists (8.0%), HR generalists (5.3%), or other roles (4.7%) such as wellbeing specialist and an operational manager.

98% suggested that given the current crisis, at least some employees at their organisation are working from home. The majority of this group suggested that this was a large proportion of their employees (over 60%).

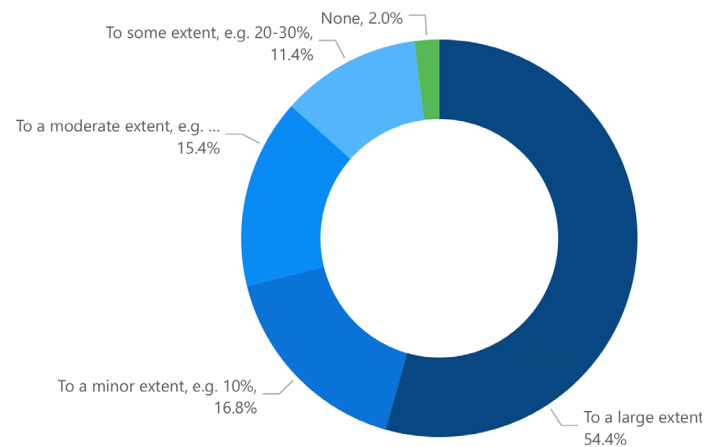
STATE/TERRITORY (N=150)



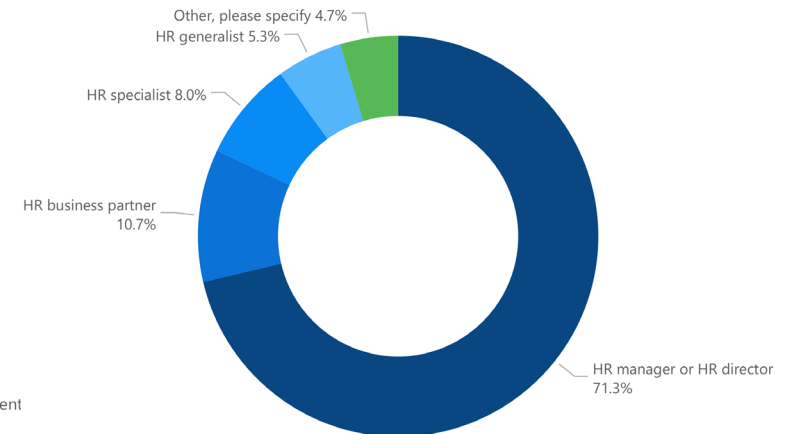
LOCATION (N=150)



EXTENT OF EMPLOYEES WORKING FROM HOME GIVEN THE CURRENT CRISIS (N=149)



JOB ROLE (N=150)

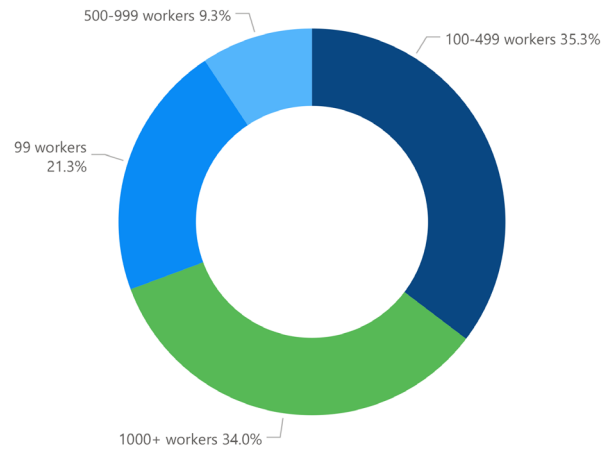


## DEMOGRAPHICS

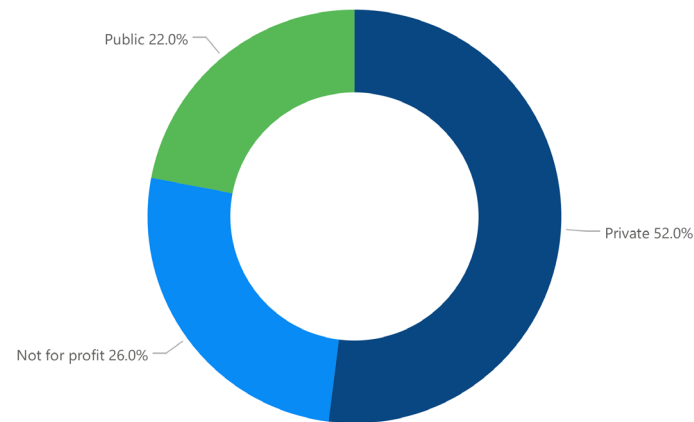
The majority of respondents report either working in medium size organisations (100-499 workers; 35.3%) or very large organisations (1000+ workers; 34%).

Further, the majority of respondent organisations are in the private sector (52%), and in the Professional, scientific and technical services industry (26%).

ORGANISATION SIZE (N=150)



SECTOR (N=150)

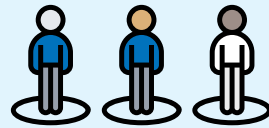


INDUSTRY (N=150)

Professional, scientific and technical services	26.0%
Public administration and safety	10.7%
Manufacturing	9.3%
Administrative and support services	7.3%
Education and training	7.3%
Financial and insurance services	5.3%
Accommodation and food services	4.7%
Construction	4.7%
Transport, postal and warehousing	4.0%
Electricity, gas, water and waste services	2.7%
Rental, hiring and real estate services	2.7%
Agriculture, forestry and fishing	2.0%
Education	2.0%
Information media and telecommunications	1.3%
Professional	1.3%
Transport	0.7%
Unspecified/other	8.0%



## A tough time



More than

**1/3**

of respondents suggested their organisation has stood down or made people redundant; considering this is an HR function it means more practitioners having difficult conversations more often.

It's a fundamental call for mental health checks among HR practitioners.

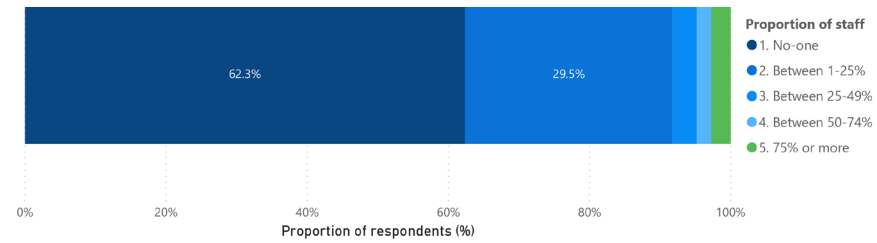
# STAND DOWNS AND REDUNDANCIES

Respondents were asked what proportion of their staff had been stood down or made redundant as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

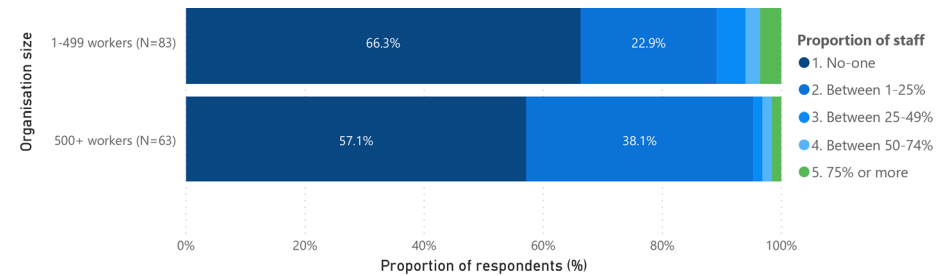
More than 1/3 suggest that their organisation had stood down or made people redundant (37.7%), with the majority of that group reporting this only impacted 1-25% of their employees (29.5%).

The impact of COVID-19 on stand-downs and redundancies is reported more so by respondents in larger organisations above 500 workers (42.9%) than in smaller organisations (33.7%). Further, respondents working in the private sector report the greatest impact (48%), followed by those in not for profit (36.8%) and the public sector (15.2%).

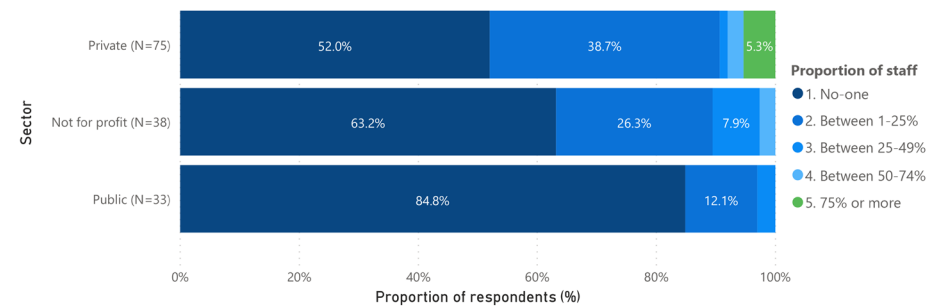
WHAT PROPORTION OF STAFF HAVE BEEN STOOD DOWN OR MADE REDUNDANT IN YOUR ORGANISATION? (N=146)



WHAT PROPORTION OF STAFF HAVE BEEN STOOD DOWN OR MADE REDUNDANT IN YOUR ORGANISATION - BY ORGANISATION SIZE (N=146)



WHAT PROPORTION OF STAFF HAVE BEEN STOOD DOWN OR MADE REDUNDANT IN YOUR ORGANISATION - BY SECTOR (N=144)



## Coping with disconnection

**62.6%**

of HR practitioners are struggling with the loss of a physical connection to their team, and less than half are reminding themselves they can't do everything, or feeling relieved when letting go of responsibilities.

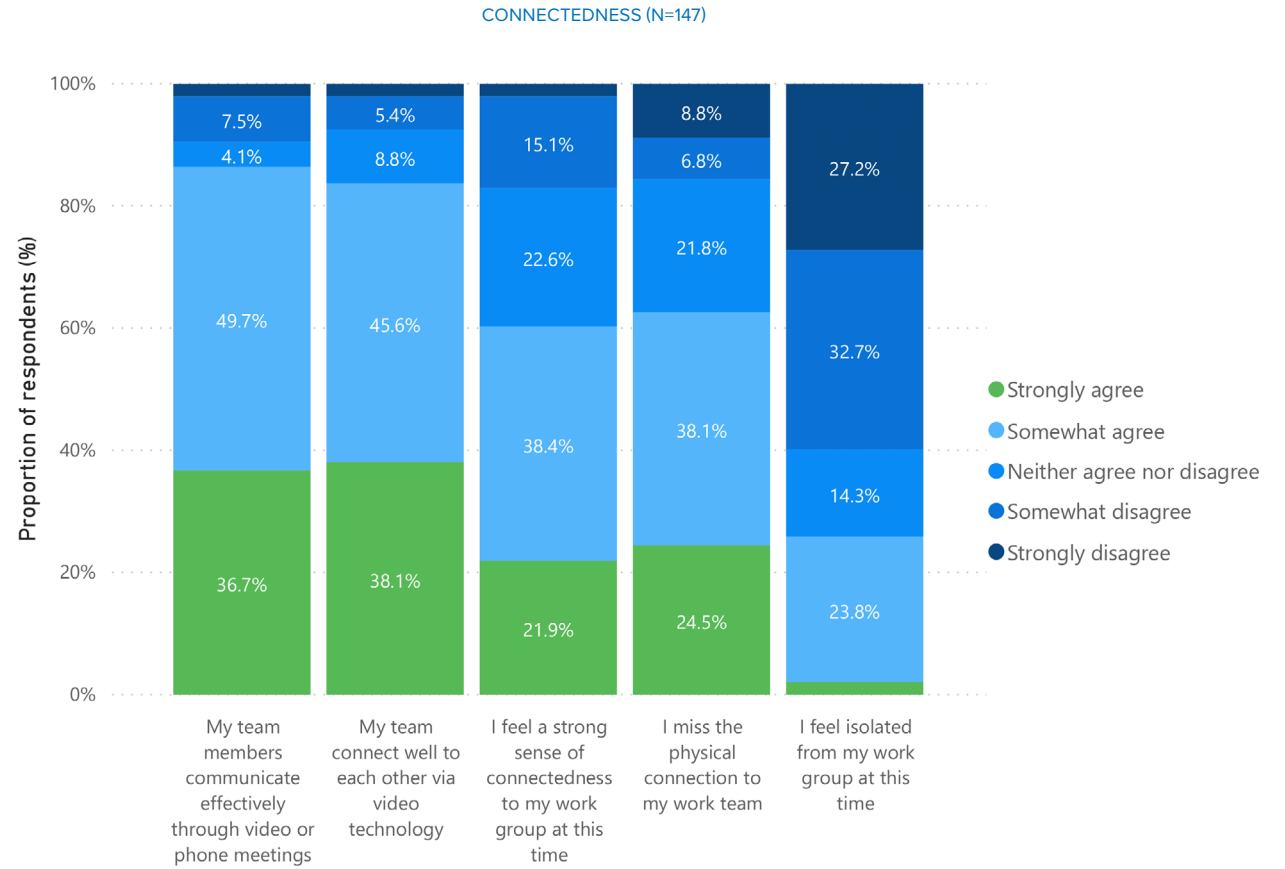
**1/4**

This is troubling as it is an early indication of mental health decline, and at a time where 1 in 4 of them feel completely isolated from their regular work groups.

# CONNECTEDNESS

Respondents suggest that their teams are communicating and connecting effectively through video or phone meetings (86.4% and 83.7% respectively), but that less are experiencing a strong sense of connectedness to their work group (60.3%).

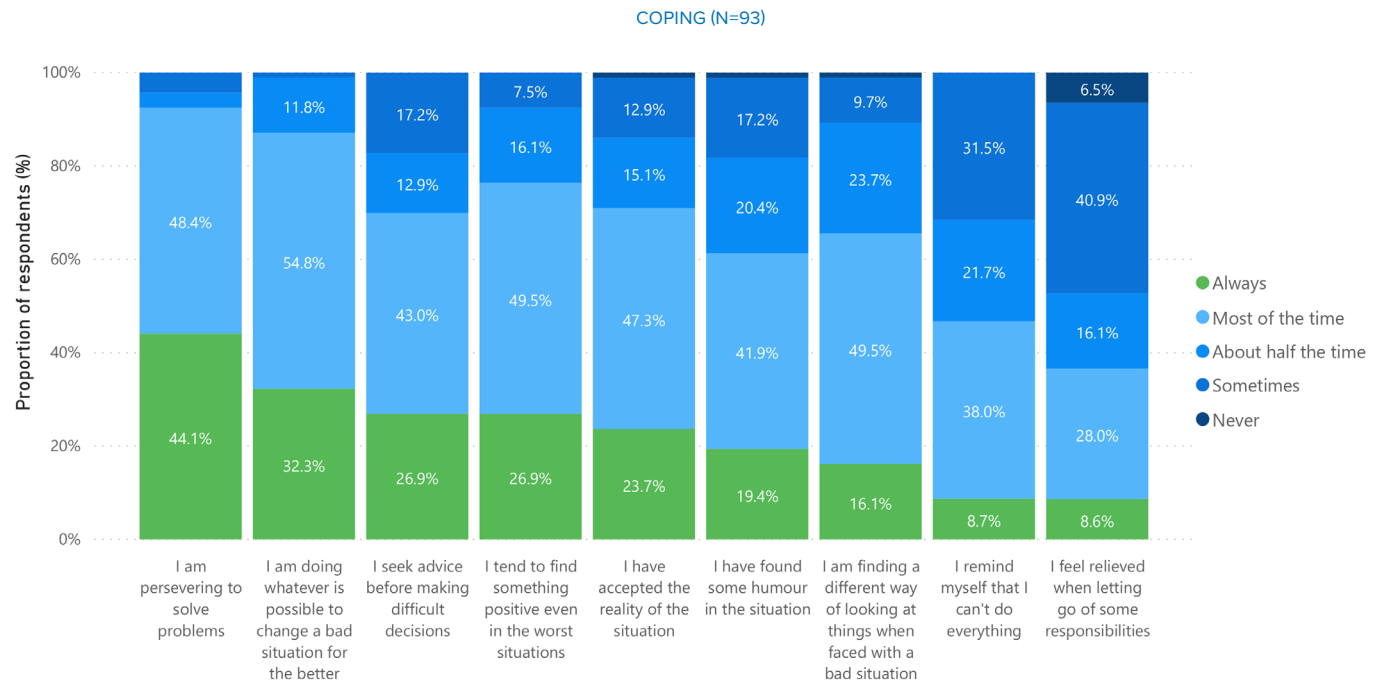
Further, the majority (62.6%) miss the physical connection to their work team, and over 1/4 (25.8%) are feeling isolated from their work group.



## COPING

In relation to coping, many respondents suggest they are persevering to solve problems at least most of the time, and doing whatever is possible to change a bad situation for the better most of the time (92.5% and 87.1% respectively).

Less than 1/2 are actively reminding themselves that they can't do everything (46.7%), or feeling relieved when letting go of responsibilities (36.6%).





## Work overload

2/3

HR leaders feel like they cannot ever seem to catch up on their work (2 in 3) and would prefer more hours in the day.

73%

But what's more outstanding is that a large majority (73%) are working on things they don't have the time – or energy – to do.



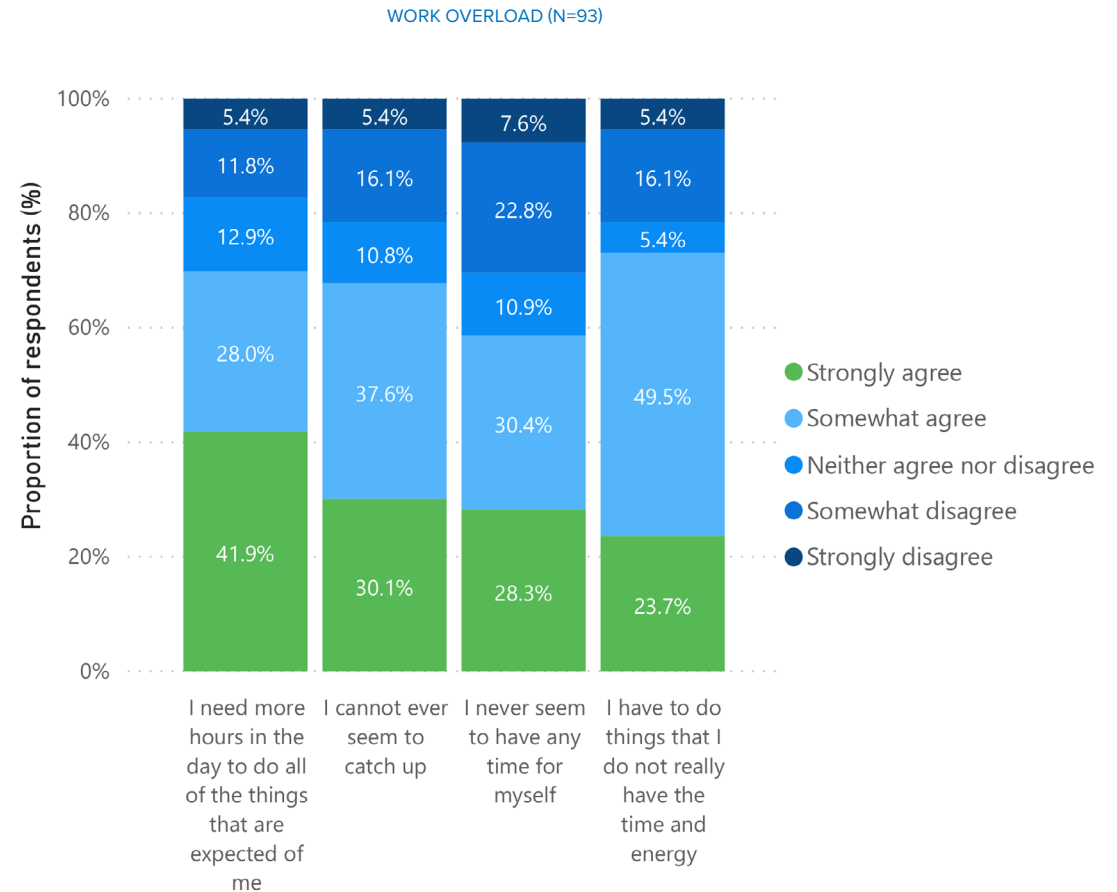
Having a conversation with their supervisor about work overload and struggle is important here

## WORK OVERLOAD

The results in relation to work overload of the HR community are troubling. More than 2/3 HR leaders (67.7%) believe cannot ever seem to catch up.

Almost 3/4 (73.2%) believe they have to do things they don't have the time and energy for.

Another 2/3 HR leaders believe they need more hours in the day to complete things expected of them.



## A fine line



Physically, HR practitioners are suffering: 90.3% of them are experiencing feeling tired for no reason at least some of the time – a symptom often related to mental stress. HR is divided on how they feel about their jobs during this pandemic – just over half are still happy in their job, or finding meaning in their work.

If almost half of a profession is feeling like they are no longer purposeful in their work, it's a worrying sign that stress is taking its toll.

## MENTAL HEALTH

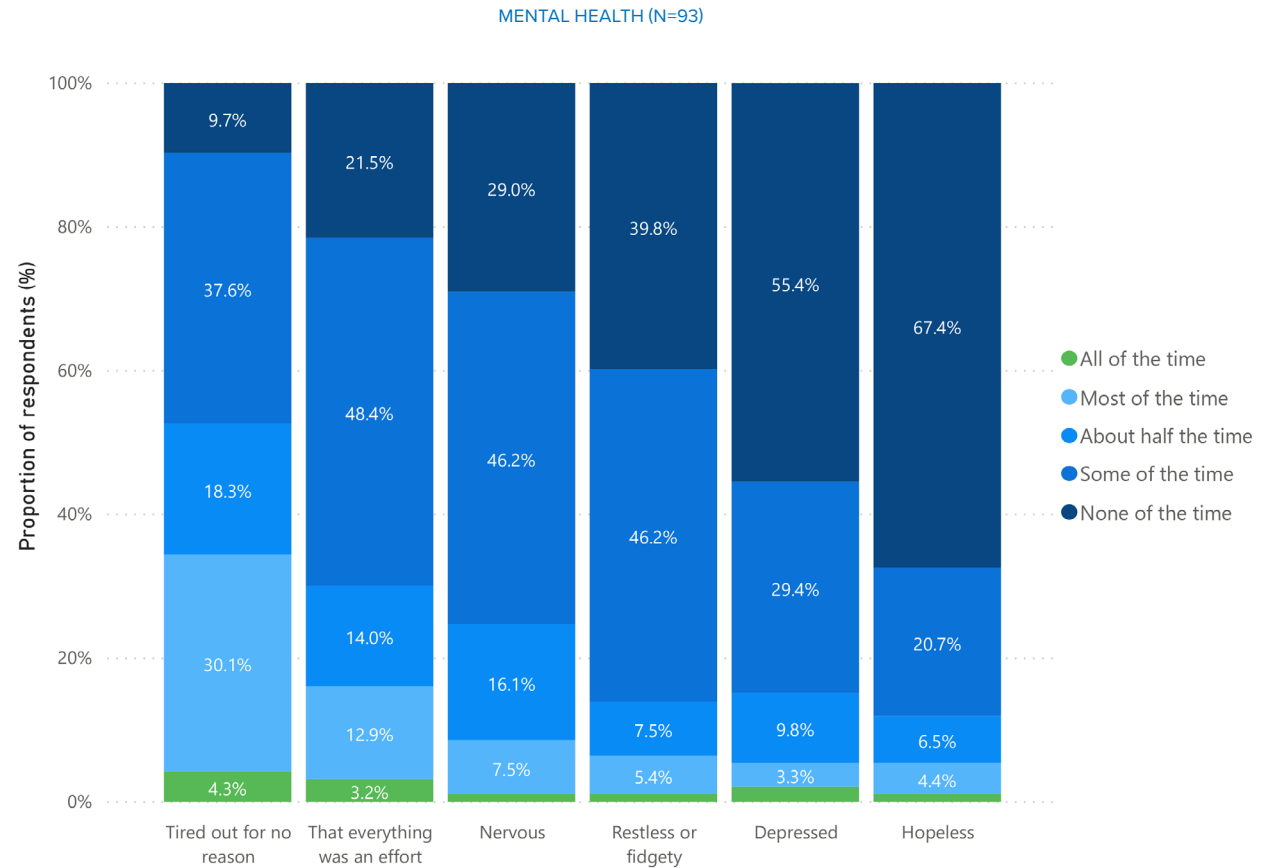
We asked how often HR leaders have experienced a number of measures relating to poor mental health over the previous 6 weeks.

While HR leaders are reporting lower rates of feeling hopeless, depressed, and restless or fidgety, what is worrying is that over 1/2 (52.7%) suggest they are feeling tired out for no reason for at least half of the time. 90.3% are experiencing this at least some of the time.

Almost 1/3 of respondents suggest that everything was an effort for at least half the time (30.1%), and 78.5% suggest this was the case at least some of the time.

Finally, almost 1/4 report that they felt nervous for at least half the time (24.8%), and 71% said this was true at least some of the time.

AHRI will continue to explore the reasons that this may be the case, specific to the HR community.



# WELLBEING

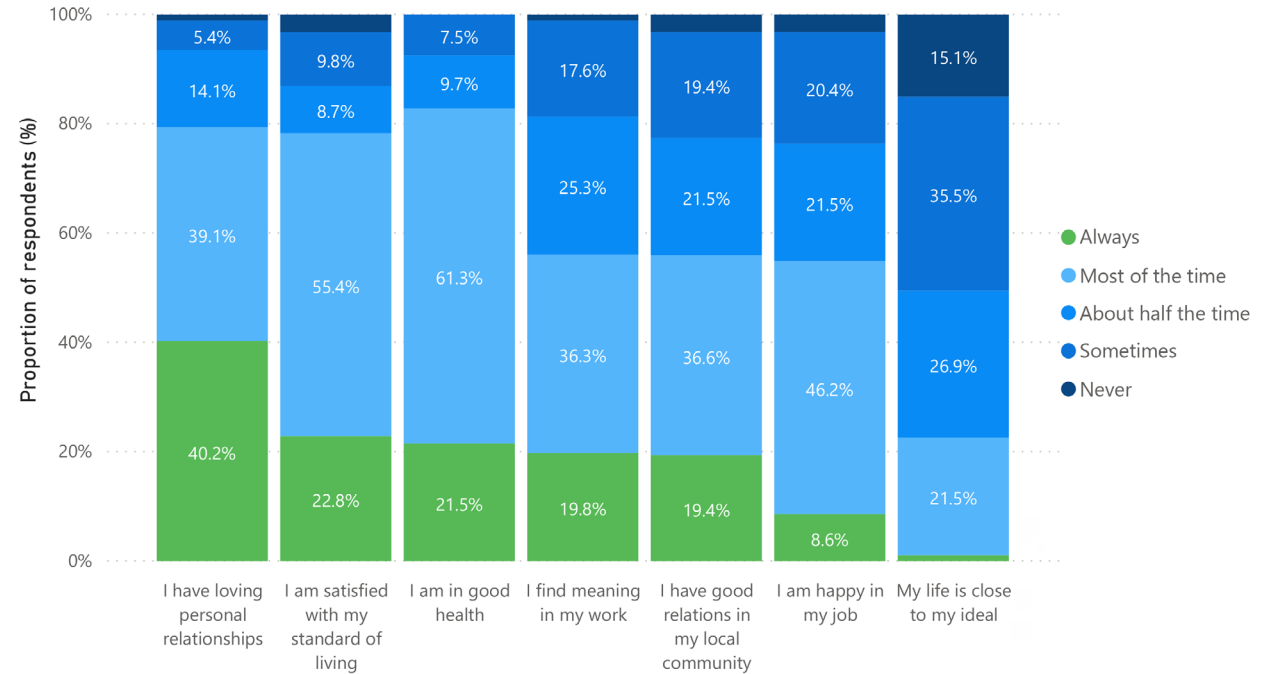
We asked respondents how the previous month could be best described in relation to their wellbeing.

While most aspects of wellbeing were highly rated (loving personal relationships, satisfactory standard of living, good health), only 22.6% suggest their life was close to ideal for this period, at least for most of the time.

Only 54.8% state they were happy in their job at least most of the time. Further, only 56% report they had good relations in their local community for at least most of the time, and 56.1% suggest they found meaning in their work at least most of the time.

In summary, many respondents are confident in their personal relationships, standard of living, and health. Less are confident about their wellbeing in relation to the workplace and community, and few respondents feel confident about their life being ideal.

WELLBEING (N=91)

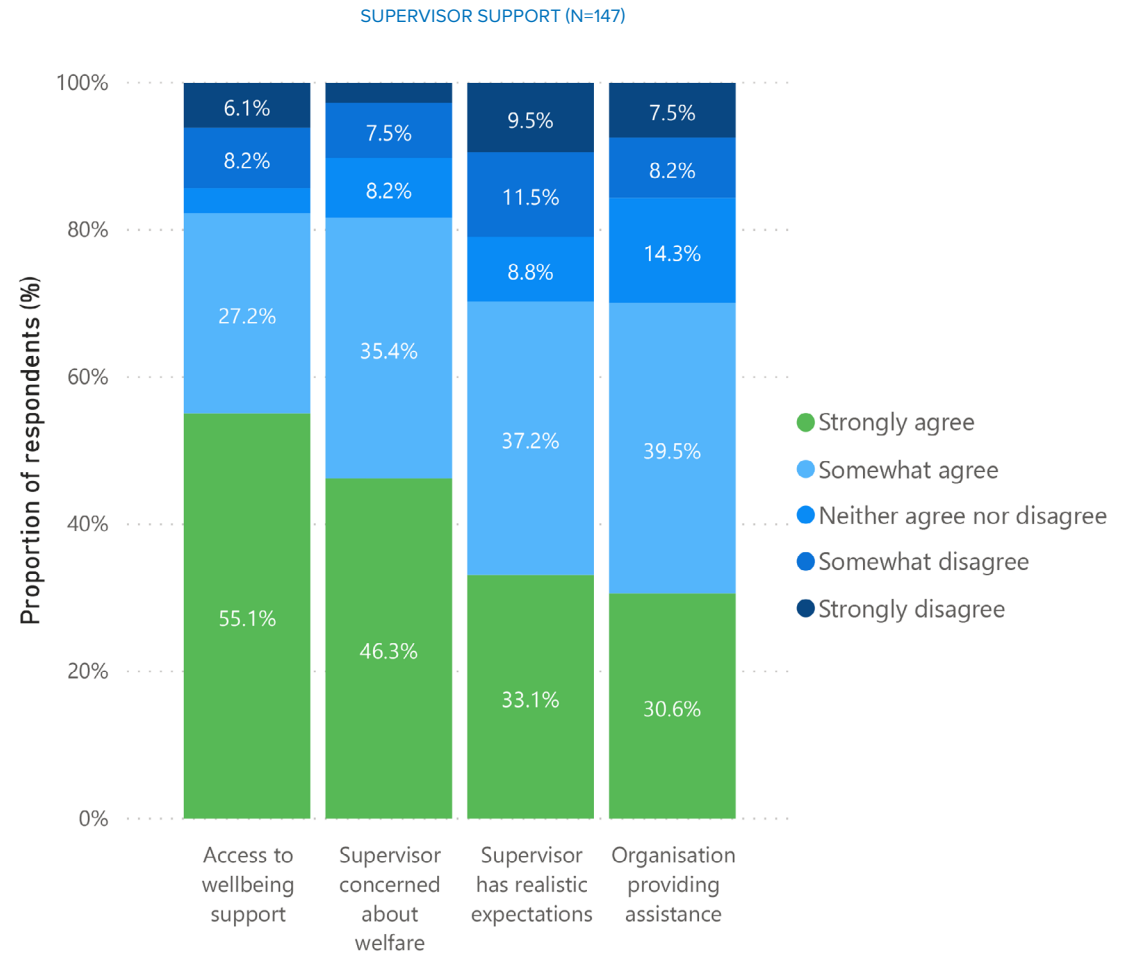




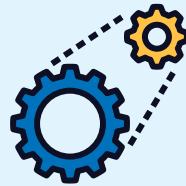
## SUPERVISOR SUPPORT

Results from this survey in relation to supervisor support are very encouraging, in that most respondents are seeing access to psychological wellbeing support in their organisation (82.3%), and stating that their supervisor is concerned about their welfare (81.7%).

There are slightly less respondents reporting that their supervisor has realistic expectations (70.3%) or that their organisation is providing them assistance to work their best during this time (70.1%).



## Performance systems



Performance management systems are challenged in a remote environment – just slightly over half of respondents believe their system is capable of performance managing remote workers, even though their organisation provides training for managers to support performance management of remote workers.

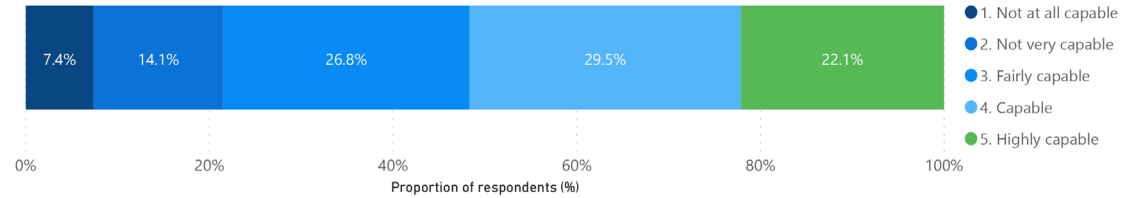
This suggest an area that requires radical improvement at a time where digitisation has scaled and accelerated rapidly.

# REMOTE WORKING & PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT

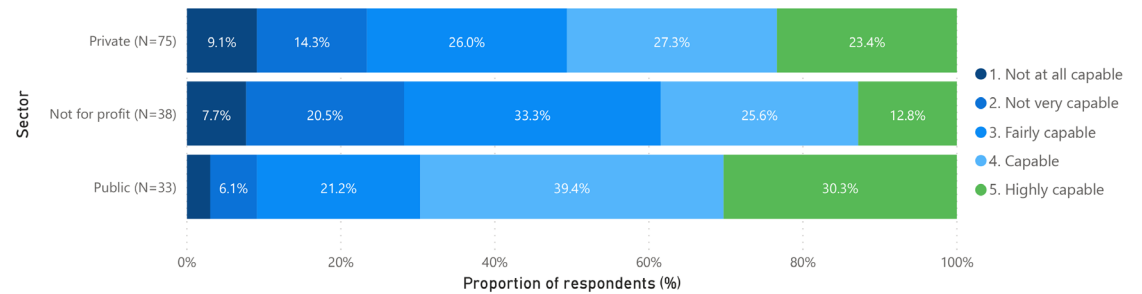
Only half of the respondents (51.6%) suggest their performance management system is capable or highly capable of managing the performance of remote workers.

This capability was rated higher by respondents with organisations in the public sector (69.7%) than for those from private or not for profit organisations (50.7% and 38.4%, respectively).

IS YOUR ORGANISATION'S PERFORMANCE SYSTEM CAPABLE OF MANAGING THE PERFORMANCE OF REMOTE WORKERS? (N=149)



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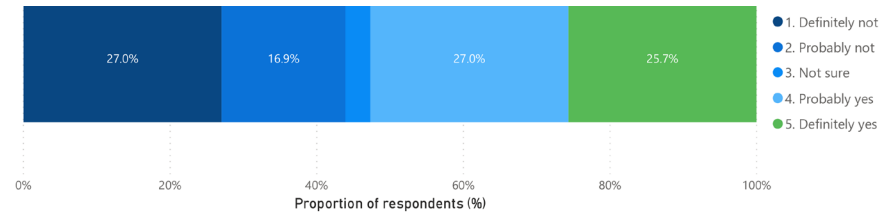
# REMOTE WORKING & PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT

Only ½ of respondents (52.7%) suggest their organisation provides training for managers to support the performance of remote workers.

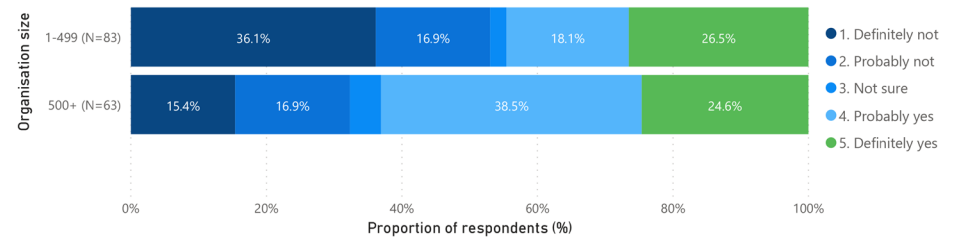
This finding was a lot more likely for respondents from larger organisations above 500 workers (63.1%) than those from smaller organisations (44.6%).

This was also a lot less likely for respondent organisations in the not for profit sector (38.4%) than for public or private sectors (66.7% and 54%, respectively).

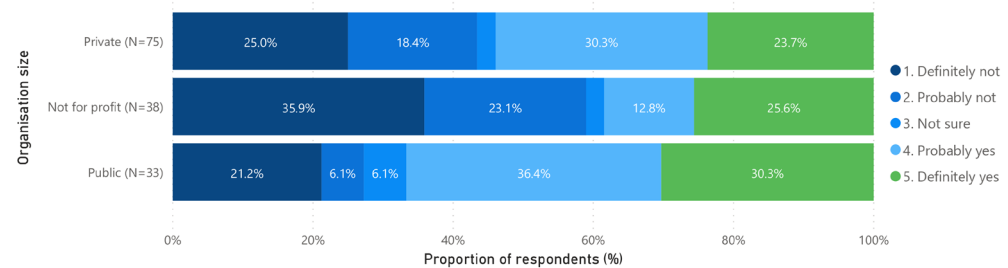
DOES YOUR ORGANISATION PROVIDE TRAINING FOR MANAGERS TO SUPPORT THE PERFORMANCE OF REMOTE WORKERS? (N=148)



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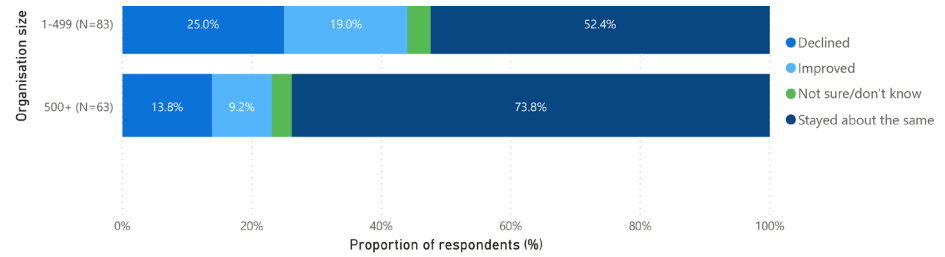
# ORGANISATION PERFORMANCE

The majority of respondents suggest their organisation's performance stayed about the same since the start of the COVID-19 crisis (61.7%). Of the organisations that stated they had experienced change (34.9%), the majority report a decline in performance (20.1%) rather than an increase (14.8%).

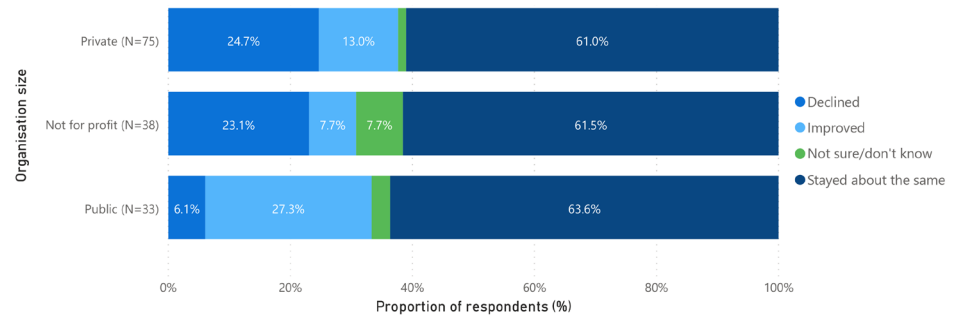
However, larger organisations above 500 workers experienced less change than smaller organisations overall (23% as opposed to 44%).

Further, respondents from the public sector were more likely to report performance improvement (27.3%) than the private sector (13%) or not for profit sector (7.7%).

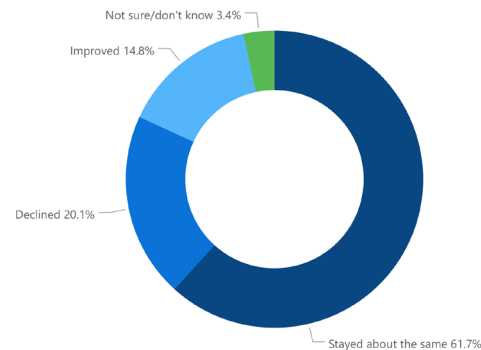
SINCE THE CRISIS, WHAT HAS HAPPENED TO YOUR ORGANISATION'S OVERALL PERFORMANCE? (N=149)



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# SHIFTING HR FOCUS

We asked respondents to map the average proportion of their work against our AHRI Model of Excellence competencies.

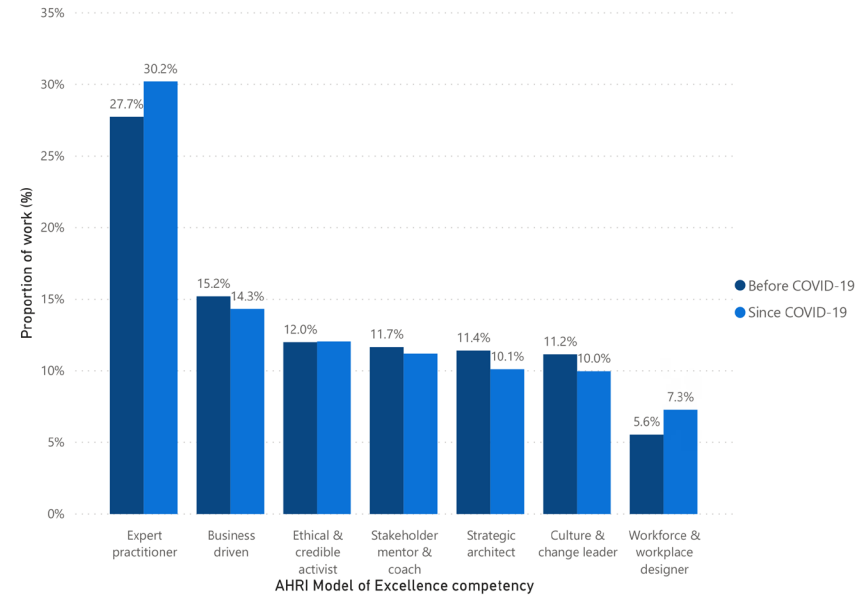
The items that have experienced the largest percentage increases as a result of the crisis were:

- Workforce and workplace designer – i.e. designing and planning of work in the future (31.4% percentage increase of competency)
- Expert practitioner – i.e. HR operational work (8.9% percentage increase of competency)

The items that have experienced the largest percentage decreases as a result of this crisis were:

- Strategic architect – i.e. work on strategy and policy (-11.5% percentage decrease of competency)
- Culture and change leader – i.e. work on change programs (-10.7% percentage decrease of competency)

AVERAGE PROPORTION OF WORK AGAINST AHRI MODEL OF EXCELLENCE COMPETENCIES (N=95)



AVERAGE PERCENTAGE CHANGE OF WORK AGAINST AHRI MODEL OF EXCELLENCE COMPETENCIES

	% Difference	% Change of competency
Business driven	-0.9%	-5.9%
Culture & change leader	-1.2%	-10.7%
Ethical & credible activist	0.1%	0.4%
Expert practitioner	2.5%	8.9%
Stakeholder mentor & coach	-0.5%	-3.9%
Strategic architect	-1.3%	-11.5%
Workforce & workplace designer	1.7%	31.4%



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